



**Mental Fitness
Strategies for
SHARPENING FOCUS,
BOOSTING ENERGY...**

**...and WINNING
THE WORKDAY**

BRAIN ON!

DEB SMOLENSKY

“This book dives deep into the prefrontal cortex and reintroduces us with vigor and joy to what is possible when we use our heads with intention.”

DANIEL H. PINK #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

Praise for **BRAIN ON!**

“*Brain On!* is a great resource to elicit the intrapersonal skills critical to bringing more compassion, energy, well-being, and gratitude into the workplace and workday.”

CLAUDE SILVER, Chief Heart Officer, VaynerX, LLC

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SCOTT SHUTE, former Head of Mindfulness and Compassion Programs, LinkedIn

“We all accept that business performance is a function of human performance—but we don’t always invest in the mental health, aptitude, and skills of our people. Deb is working to change that. Her approach is a critical input to better the health of our workforce and our businesses.”

ERIC LANGSHUR, Co-Founder and Managing Partner,
Abundant Venture Partners

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***Brain On!: Mental Fitness Strategies for Sharpening
Focus, Boosting Energy, and Winning the Workday***

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GAME ON! LET'S GET STARTED

I've spent most of my career focused on mental well-being and human performance in the workplace. I've learned that well-being isn't just about your physical or financial status. The core of well-being is nurturing a strong, healthy, resilient mindset. *I believe the only way to thrive at work is to prioritize mental well-being above anything else.* This is a radically new way of thinking about your workday—taking the steps to ensure your mental well-being is intact before tackling any of your goals for the day and interacting with your colleagues and team.

Meet Your Brain Trainer

I've worked with hundreds of major organizations designing strategies and programs for thousands of employees. This experience has given me a whole new perspective on what's wrong with how most of us spend our days in an autopilot, brain-off way. We haven't been taught how to protect and regulate our brain's energy so we can be more productive and happier at work. And it's not just my perspective—there's real science that shows you can train your brain to become more focused, energized, and joyful at work. When you achieve this, you will discover that your relationships become stronger, and you have the energy to sustain growth in your skills and reach your goals. This is where true happiness exists at work and in life.

The brain has always fascinated me, and I'm in total awe of how it works. I'm a neuroscience and psychology junkie and a lifelong learner. The most powerful thing I've learned over the years is that this mysterious, complex gray matter in our heads can be improved and upgraded through mental fitness training that builds up your brain's muscles.

Of course, your brain doesn't really have muscles like your body, but that's how I like to imagine helping my brain become wiser and more resilient. Your brain's muscles become "stronger" as you learn to stay Brain On! and develop healthier and more productive responses to everyday tasks. This muscle analogy is my way of translating neuroscience, psychology, and preventive health into everyday terms and ideas that we can use to develop a high-performing brain.

I like to think of myself as the "Cliff Notes Queen" of mental

Game On! Let's Get Started

fitness training. Why? Because I have spent decades studying how our brains perform on all levels in a work environment—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I explored how our brains work, through both formal learning and lots of personal reading and practice. I searched for answers on how to get more enjoyment and meaning out of work, reduce stress, gain more energy, fuel my passions, and build deeper personal connections.

My big ah-ha moment was when I realized our brains are hard-wired to solve for the needs of the caveman era, not the 21st century, high-paced, complex, challenging world we live in. We all were born with a bunch of primal triggers and responses that can completely throw us off track and shut down our wiser brain. We perceive a lot of daily events and interactions as threats, which result in us getting distracted, overwhelmed, and falling into procrastination, avoidance, fear, and a whole host of other unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. These are the negative results of being in the mental mode of “brain off.”

Take advantage of this homework I've done for you! I feel it's my mission to share the brain knowledge I've acquired as well as daily exercises and tips I've developed to stay Brain On! myself and for my clients. My deep wish for you is that this book will help you build a stronger, healthier, and more resilient brain for greater happiness at work and in life.

There's one thing that is true for all of us: Our brains can only focus for a limited amount of time before needing a break. To help me focus, I've adopted the Pomodoro Technique of focusing on a task for twenty-five minutes and then taking a five-minute brain break. This productivity hack has worked very well for me. I suggest

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giving it a try with this book—twenty-five minutes of reading, and then a couple minutes of reflection time. This technique is also built into many of the chapters. Or take five minutes and relax your brain without any stimulation. No checking social media or the weather forecast for the weekend. Look out your window at a tree or find pictures of nature in your office.

I also suggest reading this book in several sessions. Neuroscience studies have revealed that recall is more effective when your brain has time to process the information through rest and recovery periods, such as a nap, a good night's sleep, or even a vacation. That is when your brain takes the short-term bits of information you've learned and transfers them into long-term memory. Who wants to go through all the time and investment of reading and learning, just to forget it all the next day?

I'll illuminate many of the mental fitness insights and techniques like the ones above by sharing stories from my own life. I'm going to be vulnerable and let you in on my experiences and my own mental well-being journey. I hope my stories will help inspire and guide you in how to develop a new relationship with your brain and yourself—a relationship built on deeper understanding and compassion as you seek to become your best self at work and in life.

Your relationship with your brain will never be perfect. But in this book, you'll discover many effective mental fitness techniques, practices, and habits to keep your brain healthy, fit, and working for you, not against you. Ultimately, this will allow you to win your workday.

BRAIN CHECK: You just spent about five or ten minutes reading the previous paragraphs. How many times did your

mind jump to thinking about something else? The email waiting for you to answer, the call you need to return, the pressing errand to run, or the bills coming due for payment. No judgment here—it's just a fact of modern life. We are all juggling a million details between work and our personal tasks. Our brains simply can't keep up. They don't have storage and bandwidth for all this nonstop input. So, what happens? We end most of our days feeling emotionally drained, unfulfilled with our work performance, and just plain stressed and burned out.

We've done our best to design *Brain On!* in the most brain-friendly way possible—through readable fonts and use of white space in the design and engaging use of illustrations and color. Still, staying in the moment is difficult. Throughout the book, look for brain check activities like this one. They are a great opportunity to check in with how you are practicing Brain On! in a given moment. Consider these brain checks to be opportunities to “get your reps in” and stay ahead of the workday.

Flip the Script

This book is divided into three parts designed to “flip the script” on how to become mentally resilient at work as an individual and an organization. Parts One and Two are structured to help individuals at work, and Part Three then expands these lessons to anyone in a leadership or HR position. You'll discover that being Brain On! is what transcends any performance goals, team incentives, or bonus plans in creating engagement at work.

Part One starts our journey by discussing why you can change

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the relationship with your brain, the leading neuroscience and psychological thinking on how the brain works, and why conscious awareness of your brain's on-off state can result in more productive and happier workdays.

Part Two is the Brain On! Individual Daily Playbook, where I outline proven ways to keep your brain focused and moving toward your goals. You'll learn how to create your own mental fitness routine that will train your brain to use effective techniques, practices, and habits to get you through the obstacles you encounter at work.

Part Three is the Brain On! Organizational Playbook designed specifically for leaders, HR teams, and the overall organization to keep employees Brain On! and to create a thriving environment. If you currently don't lead or manage people, work in the HR department, or are responsible for organization-wide programs and communications, you may not want or need to read this section. If you aspire to be such a leader, I suggest keeping this book on hand for when you do become one.

My goal is to help you end each day feeling happier than you were the day before and ready to face the next day with more awareness, optimism, motivation, and resilience. We can never eliminate challenges and obstacles completely. Those are just a given in life. But you can develop an inner response mechanism that allows you to address and express your emotions around work issues in healthier ways. Achieving Brain On! prevents you from feeling like you are always churning and burning at work. You will stop wasting precious energy on meaningless tasks and start using it to succeed at your goals.

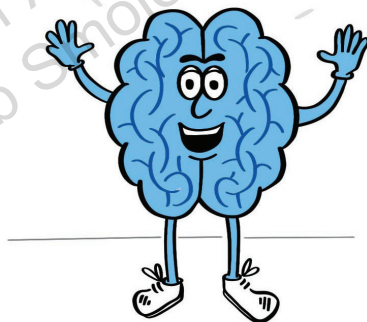
Game On! Let's Get Started

Ready to get your brain in the best shape of its life? Let's get those cells moving and the conversation started!

Meet Onyx

Incorporating healthy habits can be a challenge, especially when you can't always see the results of your hard work. When you break a bone, you can feel it heal and see your muscle tone getting stronger as you go through rehabilitation and exercises. But with your mental fitness workouts it will be hard at times to notice that you are becoming stronger and more mentally fit.

When it comes to starting any new healthy routine, such as Brain On!, I like to visualize things, so I've created this character, Onyx, to represent your brain and what it might be thinking as we introduce new ideas.



We all tend to be so hard on ourselves and our behaviors, so I hope Onyx will inspire you to view your brain and yourself with greater understanding and more self-compassion.

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PART ONE

WHY YOUR BRAIN NEEDS MENTAL FITNESS



Are you often stressed at work with too much to do? Do you get frustrated with the futility of playing catch-up with your inbox? Can't find time for the bigger, more fulfilling projects because you're running around putting out one fire after another? For most of us, the solution is to power through all our tasks at any cost to ourselves, our team, and our organization. But this way of working leaves us exhausted at 5 p.m. every day, unmotivated to start again the next day, and eventually burned out.

Here's why: your brain gets easily tripped up and turned "off" by all the daily distractions and obstacles that pop up. No matter how "smart" you may be, your brain isn't built to process all the thousands of pieces of information coming at it each day. When

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your brain feels overwhelmed, it stops its healthy “thinking” mode and defaults to the more primal “emotional” mode. That’s when we start making poor behavior choices and unwise decisions that can have lasting and destructive consequences for ourselves, our team members, and others in the organization.


I bet that’s something you’ve never thought of before—how you can help your brain regulate its emotions to avoid falling into negative or unproductive thinking. Some people talk about this training as rewiring your brain. I like to think of it as upgrading your brain to a new version that is much better suited to help you meet your goals at work and the demands of life. I want to help you move beyond reacting with the primal, emotional part of your brain to staying Brain On! and ensure you have the most engaging, productive, and fulfilling day possible. It took me a long time to grasp this concept. Much of my life I didn’t understand why I was reacting a certain way at work or in life, and why that led me to feeling anxious, frustrated, or just in a funk. I didn’t understand that if I changed the way my brain reacts, my day at work—and my life—would change for the better.

To do so, I realized I needed to develop my mental muscles and strength through mental fitness exercises and workouts. I’m going to share how I became mentally fit, and how you can, too.

CHAPTER 1

YOUR BRAIN, VERSION 1.0

“Why do I get so off track?”

 Our brains are the most powerful yet archaic “technology” that we possess. The brain doesn’t come with a “user manual.” Few of us were taught about mental well-being in school. We learned plenty about our physical body and anatomy in health and gym classes but little about how our brain functions or how we can keep it in tip-top shape from an emotional standpoint.

And here’s the real kicker: Our brains haven’t had an “upgrade” since the beginning of time. There hasn’t been a release of Brain Version 2.0 or 28.0 or 999.0. Our brains still function primarily as they did for our ancestors who walked the earth thousands of years ago.

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Like our cave dwelling ancestors, your brain is designed mainly to keep you *safe*, not to keep you *happy*. Yes, your brain pretty much wakes up every morning thinking its job is to be your protector and act like your bodyguard fending off big (and little) threats. It's not built to be your best friend, be calm and compassionate with you, give you good advice on dealing with relationships, or how to accomplish your daily goals at work. Once we understand that the brain's function is primarily as a protector, it's easy to understand why we aren't happier, calmer, and more present throughout the day. Ever wonder why you were so mad at someone, or afraid to make a mistake, or anxious about public speaking? It's your brain operating in its primal or brain-off mode. It's doing what it was originally designed to do. Keeping you safe and alert. Warning you of dangers and threats. Unfortunately, the brain was not wired to keep us in the present moment and joyfully humming along, but instead it is always scanning the horizon for problems. (If only our brains could live by the motto "Don't go looking for trouble where none exists.")

Your brain's primary organizing system is to sort every input or stimulus into two buckets: threat or reward. That means our brain's default is to consider everything as either 1) potentially causing harm or even death, or 2) being an innocent and safe interaction for us. We all operate with this basic sorting system, and it governs a great deal of our behavior. Neuroscientist Evian Gordon refers to this as the "minimize danger, maximize reward" response.¹ When you encounter something unexpected like a shadow in the corner of your eye, or a new and unknown co-worker moving into the office next door, the limbic part of your brain (the more primitive and emotional part that we share with most animals) is aroused. While that sounds like an

efficient way for a brain to handle all the “data” it’s receiving, it does not serve us well in today’s complex and nuanced world.

Your brain spends most of its day operating as a prediction machine, taking very seriously its role and responsibility in looking ahead to keep you safe. It is basically hardwired to do one thing: be on the alert for any new, strange, uncertain, or threatening situations. It does so through pattern recognition, memory recall, and past experiences. For example, when you drop your phone, you probably react quickly in a fearful way because you think your phone is now damaged. Your response is automatic and subconscious, and you create hundreds of these predictions—and fear-based reactions—every day. Your brain reacts at hyperspeed to a stimulus and makes an instant assumption, and often an incorrect and negative one.

For example, about five years ago I was taking my daily walk through the forest preserve by my home, and I saw a coyote ahead on the path. I instantly froze, and then quickly made a beeline for home. My brain did its job—kept me safe from danger. However, still to this day, when I see a large animal off in the distance, I automatically freeze and feel a slight pang of fear in my chest for a second. Until I realize most times that it’s a large dog and I couldn’t see the owner behind a tree. No coyote at all, but my brain’s initial instinct is “threat ahead.” Our brains and bodies go through that predictive (and mostly inaccurate) analysis hundreds of times a day. These moments of real or perceived threat release the hormone cortisol in our body, which is part of our built-in alarm system response. Too much cortisol in the body, however, can lead to anxiety, depression, and loss of energy and concentration. Not a great way to live your life at work or at home.

BRAIN CHECK: When in the last few days did your brain make a “threat” prediction that turned out to be something minor? Did you think you lost your keys, went into panic mode, but then found them in your coat pocket or bottom of your bag? Did you think you sent an email, but it was still in your draft folder, and you were worried that your response was too late? Did you see your boss calling you at the end of the day, and start to fear you didn’t meet a deadline, only to find out it was just about a simple question? Think about what your initial physical or emotional reactions were to situations like these. Did you feel yourself tense up or your heart speed up? Simply being aware of our brain’s natural threat predictions, and slowing down our response to them, can keep us calmer and healthier during the day.

As sophisticated and marvelous as the brain is on many fronts, it hasn’t evolved to truly process more than a couple pieces of information at a time, as Daniel Levitin explains in his book *The Organized Mind*.² Our cave-dwelling ancestors only had to deal with a suspicious rustle in the bush a couple of times each day, or maybe an occasional loud noise from a dinosaur, saber-toothed tiger, or grizzly bear. In the fast-paced, information-based world we live in, our brain is overwhelmed at the millions of pieces of information we take in each day and the decisions we need to make. And we are talking millions—Levitin says *our brain takes in over 11 million pieces of information every second unconsciously and only forty bits of information consciously*. No wonder we are all exhausted by 2 p.m. and running for a caffeinated beverage or a handful of cookies to try and boost our energy.

As Levitin emphasizes, we are only consciously aware of about 0.000001 percent of the information in our world. This leads to hundreds of internal, unconscious, emotional reactions, assumptions, biases, attitudes, and judgments all influencing your mood and day. They're also influencing your sense of choice, what you think is possible, how you react to things, and eventually the happiness and other positive results you get during the day. Just knowing this fact alone helps me realize why energy management is critical and our "brain power" is a precious resource (more about this in Chapter 3).

With all this information coming at us, it's extremely difficult for our brains to stay focused and pay attention. Distractions are ever present and keep us off-track more than on-track. There is significant scientific debate about how long we can really concentrate and focus on a task, but most research seems to agree that after ninety minutes, your productivity will start to decline. This basic rest-activity cycle (BRAC) was proposed by Dr. Nathaniel Kleitman, a sleep researcher at the University of Chicago back in the 1930s.³ Other research since then also supports that fact that people perform best with ninety minutes of work, followed by a twenty-minute rest period. This gives your brain a break and helps maintain its power.

There are dozens of moments in our day when the demands of the modern workplace can trigger our primal and predictive response. Do you cringe when you see a certain phone number come up, thinking it's your client, customer, or patient calling with a problem? Find yourself feeling frustrated when someone sends a document back again for the twelfth time, assuming there are more edits you must make because it's not right yet? Get a text from a co-worker asking for more time to finish the project? All these little

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“threat” moments during the day can shut our wise brain off, and we start to react emotionally based on past experiences and patterns. Our goal is to be smarter about how we manage our thinking and responses and maintain our mental well-being throughout the day. Key to managing ourselves and our well-being is mental fitness training which you’ll learn a lot about in Part Two.

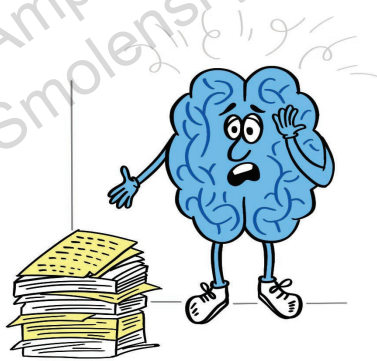
Brain-off Example

My phone rings and I see it’s my daughter’s school calling. My initial reaction is never one of glee, joy, or calmness. Within a split second, before even saying hello, I’ve decided (that is, my brain has predicted) that my kid is hurt, sick, or got in trouble, and my body is immediately armed and ready to jump into action. If I pay attention, I can sense my heart rate is up, I hold my breath, my shoulders and muscles tighten, and I’ve clenched my jaw prepared for the “blow of bad news.” Ugh. Only to find out, literally ten seconds into the call, it was nothing.

It was simply that I forgot to send in a form, or they forgot their lunch or homework. Okay, time to take a breath. After a predictive event like this, most of us never take a moment to consciously calm down, relax and process what happened. And we wonder why our necks are stiff, our back hurts, we have a heart attack early in life. Our environments and stimuli are so complex and fast paced, our brains are always in a hyperalert mode. This type of prediction and then assault on our body and mind happens hundreds of times a day. I jump from one perceived crisis to another. The minute I hang up from the school, I check my email and see my boss sent a message

asking me to call her when I have a chance. I have a great boss, so you'd think I'd remain calm. No way. Again, my brain predicts there is something wrong, and I'm back in panic mode assaulting my body all over again. The reality is she simply had a question about a report. One wrong prediction or fear-based response after another, and another, and another. All day long. Creating more stress and exhaustion. Good grief!

Luckily, there is a natural feedback loop built into our brain-body connection. We can update our prediction model using these wrong guesses to change our responses in the future. But our brains are ancient technology we are working with, so this updating doesn't happen very quickly and not without mental fitness training and tools. Even now that my girls are in college, if the school calls, I get a knot in my stomach assuming the worst has happened with them.



When it turns out to be a noneventful call regarding the tuition bill or fundraising request, I still need to peel myself off the ceiling and calm my heart down, take some deep breaths, and remember what the heck I was working on or where I was at in an important work conversation. Really?!?! We are all works in progress when it

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comes to keeping ourselves Brain On! and I'm no exception. Progress over perfection continues to be a helpful refrain for me.

As humans in the 21st century, we want and deserve more out of life. We don't want to be at the mercy of every little piece of information or unexpected communication coming at us. We want to feel happy, maintain calm, be productive, and to not be triggered by perceived threats big and small throughout the day. In this book, you'll learn how to work with the brain's innate programming to reshape and rewire it. Think of it as upgrading to a new version of your brain, just as you do with your phone or computer. When you upgrade your brain and strengthen it to be mentally fit, I promise you that this will lead to more resiliency, joy, and energy at work.

The good news is the brain can change. Science proves we can rewire our brains. This concept is called neuroplasticity. I was first introduced to the idea of neuroplasticity in Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz's book *Brain Lock*.⁴ The key concept in this book is called self-directed neuroplasticity and is referenced in many of the leading personal development, self-help, productivity, and performance books. Dr. Schwartz gave me hope that I could reprogram and rewire my brain in ways that could help me overcome my obsessive and compulsive habits and irrational thoughts. Other books that were pivotal in helping me get more mentally fit include *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life* by Dr. Daniel Amen⁵ and *Hardwiring Happiness* by Rick Hanson.⁶

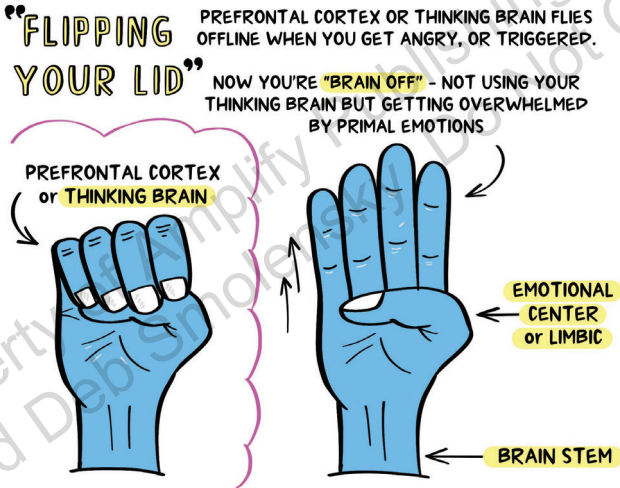
Take a minute for self-compassion here. No one has taught you how your brain operates, especially at work, how it gets in your way during the day, and takes you off course much of the time. Think back to your health class or gym class at school, and how you had to learn the muscles of the body, what they are for, and how to make

Your Brain, Version 1.0

them stronger. We're going to do the same thing now with the brain by reviewing its structure, the different parts, and how it functions (in a simple and brain-friendly way!).

The easiest way I know how to explain the brain's structure, for purposes of our mental fitness training, is to use Dr. Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain.⁷ He is a world-renowned neuropsychiatrist and uses this model to explain to parents and kids how our brain is built. It's also a great tool to understand how we get angry or frustrated when the emotional brain takes over the thinking brain.

Here's how you can picture your brain's parts:



- Hold one hand up and facing you.
- The wrist is your brain stem.
- The thumb is your emotional center or limbic, and it easily folds and flexes into the hand.
- Wrap your fingers over your thumb, and that is the prefrontal cortex or thinking brain. The prefrontal cortex flies offline when you get mad, angry, or triggered, and now

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you’ve “flipped your lid” and are brain off. This means you are not using your thinking brain but instead are getting overwhelmed by your primal emotions.

Before we can work on mental fitness strategies, we need to understand in more detail the brain’s different regions and what they are used for. Think about how you tour a fitness center before joining or starting a new routine to learn how to strengthen certain muscles with certain machines. We’re going to go on a tour of your brain in the same way, learning how to strengthen these “muscles” with different mental fitness routines. Stay with me here—this will be a lot easier and more fun than the typical science class!

There are two main regions of your brain for you to know about—the emotional brain and the thinking brain. ***Here’s the key thing to remember—these two parts can’t both be “on” at the same time.*** Guess which one part is on most of the time? Hint: it’s the one that is scanning the world for threats. Our default mode is to the emotional brain and its fight-flight nature. That’s what gets us in trouble because our default mode = brain-off mode.

The Brain On! mode is our thinking brain or the prefrontal cortex. This is what keeps us in a rational, wise, and conscious operating mode throughout the day. It’s where our best decision-making and problem-solving happens. The prefrontal cortex is extremely important because it manages all those critical skills like comprehension and planning. Neuroleadership expert Dr. David Rock’s *Brain at Work*⁸ explains that the prefrontal cortex is the biological seat of your conscious interactions with the world. It’s the part of your brain central to thinking through things, instead of being on

autopilot. He clearly outlines how critical this region is for our happiness and success, as it controls how we:

- Understand (and are open to new ideas)
- Make decisions (compare and choose between two things)
- Recall (information from memory)
- Memorize (take in information and hold on to it)
- Inhibit (keep other nonrelevant thoughts out of our working memory)

Our prefrontal cortex is always competing with the emotional center of our brain and especially the amygdala. This part of the brain elicits our emotional responses. In today's complex world, our amygdala is on hyperalert and responding in that fight-flight-freeze routine. Over and over, all day long. Wearing our energy down until we feel edgy and unhappy.

BRAIN CHECK: Quick, how are you feeling right now in one word? Happy, sad, angry, tired? Can you even describe your emotion? Most of us automatically respond quickly instead of taking time to assess how we are really feeling. Research shows that less than a third of people can tell you what emotion they're experiencing in any given moment. Psychology once assumed that most human emotions fall within the universal categories of happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust. But a study from Greater Good Science Center⁹ suggests that there are at least twenty-seven distinct categories of emotions. Within those categories, there can be dozens

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of distinct, identifiable emotions. Why is it important to be able to identify our emotions? As author and researcher Brené Brown says in her book *Atlas of the Heart*, “When we name an emotion of experience, it doesn’t give that emotion or experience more power, it gives US more power.”¹⁰ The more we can name emotions, the more we are able to regulate them.

Your amygdala and this abundance of emotional responses doesn’t have to be a runaway train, however. Emotions aren’t hardwired into your brain at birth. They are constantly being formed throughout the day. Here’s the good news: ***We can use our brain to manage and create the emotions we want to experience at work.*** This is probably one of the most empowering sentences you will read in this book. Having emotional regulation is at the core of being mentally fit. In the following chapters, you’ll learn strategies and techniques to keep you in a highly energized state—one where you are open to learning and growth and feel more positive about your future at work.

BRAIN CHECK: Okay, before heading into Chapter 2, you’ll want to check in with yourself and make sure you’re Brain On! and ready to learn more. Or do you need to take a quick break and give your eyes and brain a little breather from all this information? Take a moment, once again, to notice your energy level. Are you tired, energized, hungry, thirsty? If so, take a quick stretch break. Or even just one minute to reflect on what you’ve learned and how you can apply that learning in your daily life. This will help give your brain a quick reset and refresh and be ready to learn more.